



# ILLUSTRATING IDENTITY

## BODY PIERCING & PHOTOGRAPHY

Amelia Guimarin, November 14th, 2006  
105th Annual American Anthropological Association Meeting  
Visual Research Conference, San Jose, California

### ABSTRACT

Body piercing and photography are two instances of the human manipulation of visual media: one is a topic of anthropological study, and the other a tool. Using photography and ethnographic research of the contemporary, western practice of body piercing as an example, this presentation explores the ability of photographs to exhibit the embodiment of personal and communal identity. The research not only uses visual media as a means of anthropological study, it also focuses on the use of what may be the most 'natural' or at least universally human visual media, the body. The creation and demonstration of identity is an actively visual process. We relate to each other and to ourselves through our bodies, and thus our bodies become the objects of our expression, the visual media of our identity.

Much of the photography included in ethnographic texts is appended as a means of granting authority to

the researcher or as an attempt to help the reader visualize the site and subject of research. Aside from the ethical concerns of this approach, as a methodology it is limiting in that it does not allow the audience to experience the photographs as a separate dimension of the study. Most ethnographies transition from words to images without facilitating the transition of the user from the position of reader to that of viewer. This limits the extent to which the photographs may serve as a deeper and alternate agency of communication and understanding. The strategic use of photography as an instrument and exhibit of research should be regarded as essential rather than supplemental to the anthropological study of visual media.

### SEGMENT 1

This presentation, these photographs, came out of the research I began in the fall of 2003. Between then and the spring of 2005, I studied the practice of body piercing among college-aged youths in Orange County, California. This research culminated in the spring of 2005 with a thesis entitled, "In the Flesh: Body Piercing as a Form of Commodity-Based Identity and Ritual Rite of Passage." I found that body piercing is a rite of passage performed during a

liminal stage as a way to create or reconcile an identity through the use of commodities. To situate this argument, I am going to go through a quick history of contemporary western body piercing and present you with my findings. I will then move on to several arguments regarding the use of photography in studying visual cultural practices.

Body piercing as it is practiced today in suburbs across the nation, across the world even, originated from circus sideshows, closeted freaks, and later the gay, sadomasochistic, fetish subculture of the 1970s. In 1892, Horace Ridler and Ethel Granger were born. Ridler was British and Granger American. At the age of 22, Ridler decided to devote himself to a career as a sideshow performer and began acquiring a few, small, pictorial tattoos. He found that he could not make enough money off of these relatively reserved modifications and commissioned a tattoo artist to furnish a full body suit of curved stripes, like those of a zebra. He also had his teeth filed to sharp points and obtained large gauge ear and septum piercings. He toured Odditoriums under the name, The Great Omi until the early 1950s. During those years he appeared in Ripley's Believe it or Not, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, and at the 1939 World's Fair in Queens, New York. Granger, on the other hand, practiced her modification more privately, only her world record 13-inch corseted waist was known to anyone aside from her husband, who was the impetus behind her other modifications, which included nose, septum, nipple, ear lobe, and ear cartilage piercings.

Ridler and Granger are the only two westerners known to have practiced non-mainstream body modification to any significant degree before the 1960s. It was during this decade that body piercing began to emerge in the gay subculture which included participation in S&M and wearing of leather, metal, and other tough, hyper-masculine attire. It makes sense that body piercing found its way into this subculture as both are associated with ritual, pain, and adornment using tough materials. In this scene, body piercing spread from New York to Los Angeles with the movement of Jim Ward, who is recognized as the pioneer of body piercing as we know it today. Ward developed the basic jewelry and procedures now established as convention by the Association of Professional Piercers and practiced in piercing shops around the world. Some of the jewelry designed by Ward include the captive bead ring, internally threaded barbell, nipple retainers, locks, seamless rings, and septum retainers. Ward also introduced the use of surgical steel and niobium as construction materials. Ward began by piercing himself in New York in the late 1960s and then others when he moved to Los Angeles in 1973. In Los Angeles, Ward met two other influential body piercing enthusiasts, Doug Malloy and Fakir Musafar. Malloy and Ward were close friends; in 1975, with Malloy's financial support, Ward began a body-piercing business called Gauntlet.

Malloy organized social events he called "T&P (Tattoo and Piercing) Parties" where gay men would meet and pay Ward for piercings. It was through these T&P Parties that Ward gained the experience with procedure and jewelry necessary to open a full-fledged, storefront body

piercing shop in West Hollywood in 1978. Ward chose West Hollywood because it was a hub of gay culture, his most likely clientele, and had a good relationship with local police. Even with its then subculture status, Ward ran his shop as a place where people from any walk of life could come to get pierced. In addition to his contribution to actual piercing procedure, Ward was the first to introduce hygiene practices now considered standard and even mandated by local laws and regulations on body modification where they exist. These practices include the wearing of gloves by piercers, the sterilization of jewelry and tools by autoclave, and the single use and immediate disposal of needles using medical sharps containers. In addition to its Los Angeles storefront, Gauntlet was instrumental in disseminating the practice of body piercing through its publication of Piercing Fans International Quarterly or PFIQ, a magazine containing articles about and pictures of body piercing. The first issue was published in 1977 and continued until Gauntlet came to an end in 1998. I have addressed the historical aspects of the birth and growth of the modern body piercing movement, now I will move on to address how body piercing emerged from a subculture practice to a mainstream phenomenon.

Cultural analyst Dick Hebdige theorizes that subcultures become incorporated into mainstream culture through reification and stylization perpetuated by mass media. Hebdige draws his theories from his study of punk culture in London in the 1970s; the punk movement gained the attention of the general public and was commodified, through both the consumption of images and the emergence of consumer goods, mainly fashion products, based on the aesthetics highlighted in those images. In this same way, the gay, S&M, fetish subculture of body piercing was incorporated into mainstream culture. In the mid to late 1980s, body piercing shops like Gauntlet began to emerge, celebrities such as Madonna and Axl Rose were showing off their piercings, and by 1991 Lollapalooza concert goers could choose from several different vendors to obtain their piercings. In 1993, supermodel Christie Turlington strutted down the runway with a navel piercing, as did a 1997 Miss America Pageant contestant. So, when Super Bowl 38 rolled around in 2004, America was more shocked to see Janet Jackson's breast than to see that she had a nipple piercing. I have historically situated the contemporary western practice of body piercing and will present you with my research findings in my next segment.

## SEGMENT 2

My findings, from ethnographic interviews, have shown that among college-age individuals body piercing is seen mainly as a way of expressing self-identity. When asked why they chose to get pierced, most interviewees said that they did it because they wanted to do something different to mark themselves off from everyone else. Some put a temporal aspect

on their self-identity stating that their piercings were a way to demonstrate to themselves and others "who [they are] now." Of those who said this, a few responded that they probably would not keep their piercings, while others said they would never think of getting rid of them. These conventions even differed amongst various piercings on the same individual who felt that some of her piercings were more definitive of and important to her concept of self, while others were less so. The majority of interviewees believed that getting a body piercing was a means of creating self-identity because it is seen as a practice of youth and those concerned with being unique. When I asked how body piercing, which is now common, can make one unique, respondents said that the uniqueness came from the fact that the piercings have to be inserted in the flesh and "almost [become] a part of you." Considering the pain aspect of body piercing, most interviewees responded that the pain helped to solidify the meaning of the piercing for them and for those who viewed it because they too would know that it was a painful process. In support of this observation of pain by others, pierced individuals state that strangers will, upon seeing their piercings, most commonly say "That must have hurt," or, in the form of a rhetorical question, "Did that hurt?" When asked about the commodity aspect of body piercing, respondents said that they saw body piercing as separate from most other commodities because it cannot simply be purchased, it must be performed on the body.

To theorize these findings I draw upon the work of cultural theorists, Kim Hewitt, who deals with the issue of pain in body piercing. Hewitt reasons that the pain of body piercing creates a heightened sense of subjectivity for the individual undergoing the process and thus lends itself to being a means of self-identity. As for the commodity facet of body piercing, social scientist Paul Sweetman argues that although body piercing cannot be separated from commodity culture, it fails to fit into theorizations of commodity fetishism because the production aspect of body piercing cannot be denied or overlooked. The individual buying and undergoing the piercing is, like the individual selling and performing the piercing, a producer in that she must actively participate in its enactment as a commodity, she must decide exactly why, how, and where she wants the piercing, and in that regard the piercing becomes defined by the piercee and reflexively defines her. But, body piercing is not only a form of commodity-based identity, it is also a rite of passage. Anthropological theory holds that a rite of passage is a way to deal with liminality. Anthropological study also shows that most rites of passage consist of rituals which include marking the body and sometimes an ordeal of significant pain. Calling upon this knowledge and my research, I propose that the marking, pain, and temporal aspects of body piercing are evidence of its status as a rite of passage among college-age individuals. I also argue that the prevalence of body piercing among college-age individuals can be attributed to the identity crisis that many may undergo as they leave their parents for the first time, when they occupy a liminal stage, situated between definition based on their family unit and definition based on their peers. Now that I have outlined my findings and their

historical and theoretical foundations, I will present my first argument for the use of photographs as subtext rather than evidence in the study of visual cultural practices.

### SEGMENT 3

My thesis addresses an audience who may not be familiar with body piercing. I use words to describe body piercing, but information is lost in the translation of the corporeal, visual practice of body piercing into the text of an ethnography. Therefore, I use photographs to illustrate this act. Translating a cultural practice into a text objectifies that practice. Translating a cultural practice into a photograph also objectifies that practice.

However, when dealing with a primarily visual cultural practice, providing visual documentation only as evidence of what has been described in words denies the visuality of that practice and may be even more objectifying than simply including photographs for their own merit.

Drawing on the theories of Anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss and Terrence Turner, my thesis positions the human body as the most 'natural' or at least universally human visual media. Humans manipulate their bodies to convey meaning to themselves and others. But, meaning does not lie at the site of the body; rather meaning exists in social context. In relation to modern body modification, I interpret Mauss' influential concept of "techniques of the body" as having evolved into 'technologies of the body' because so many modern modifications involve procedures more invasive, permanent, surgical, and medical, or pseudo-medical, than those originally outlined by Mauss. Speaking of the technologies of the body of transgender individuals, cultural scholar Susan Stryker notes that, "On the one hand, the body is technology for performing subjective identifications and desires, and the performance doesn't stop at what seems to be the body's outer limit. . . On the other hand, the body is technology for locating the subject." I argue that these characteristics of the body are shared by photography. Like the body, photography is both a technology for situating the subject and for presenting subjective analysis, and the analysis does not stop at what seems to be the photograph's physical limit but extends into its infinite viewing contexts and forms; therefore, photography is well-suited to the study of the body and its technologies.

Since the publication of Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, photography has come to be accepted as problematic for many reasons. In agreement with the arguments of Elizabeth Edwards, I believe we should embrace those problems not in negative terms, but as inherent qualities of photography to be utilized to our advantage. Although both photography and technologies of the body objectify the human body, neither completely deny the subjectivity of the human body. Again, I call upon Stryker's insight and eloquence "Learning to live creatively within technology and as technology is not to abandon human subjectivity, for human

subjectivity is always instrumentalized through something other than itself. Rather, it is beginning to imagine new modes of subjectivity." The conventional use of photography as objective documentation, evidence, or support of an argument denies the inherent subjectivity of photography. When photography is used as such in the anthropological study of corporeal, visual cultural practices it further denies the subjectivity of the human body. I argue that learning to use photography creatively is not to abandon human subjectivity, but to imagine and present it in new ways. My next argument will focus on the use of captions and ambiguity in photography.

## SEGMENT 4

Anthropological photographs should not lead the viewer, rather they should leave room for ambiguity. When an anthropologist is conducting ethnographic research, she is filled with uncertainty. Everything she observes must be taken ambiguously, maybe leaning slightly toward one evaluation over another, but basically remaining open to any possibility that might arise and be learned from doing fieldwork. So, when doing fieldwork of visual cultural practices, photographs should be ambiguous, they need not try to evoke a theme. They also need not be captioned, or at least not directly. Allowing the audience to experience the photographs without analysis as the anthropologist experienced the scene firsthand is important to gain the full appreciation of an ethnography.

When modifying their bodies in order to convey meaning, humans accept that they will be met with alternative perceptions of their bodily presentations. Likewise, anthropologists using photography in their study of visual cultural practices should accept and embrace alternative perceptions of their photographs. Photographs that are shot to be objective or captioned to force meaning demand that the audience completely trust and agree with the anthropologist. Elizabeth Edward's praises work wherein "the viewer . . . is conscious of the ambiguity of the image which allows access to the experience of a situation in all its complexity rather than the pretence of understanding. Instead of imposing a single meaning upon the viewer, held by . . . caption, such work leaves open the different levels of interpretation." Rather than using photography as support of an argument, "this is how it was," I suggest that it be used as expression of an experience, "this is how I felt about it." I believe this can be achieved by embracing ambiguity and minimizing captions.

Taking a photograph with the intention of objectivity wrongly assumes that the camera is a reality-reproduction machine. Photographs should be composed to communicate the experience of rather than the understanding of a cultural practice. Captioning should only be practiced to ease confusion. Placing captions directly beside photographs implies to the audi-

ence "this is how it was." If used, captions should be separate from photographs and should only describe what the photograph is of, without analysis or theorizations.

As body piercing practitioners negotiate their identity in a social context mediated by circumstances beyond their control, anthropologists implement photography in a social context mediated by circumstances beyond their control. As body piercing communicates meaning by representing the experience of obtaining a body piercing, photography of visual cultural practices communicates meaning by representing the experience of those practices. And, just as body piercing can communicate different meanings to different viewers, so too should photographs be allowed to communicate different meanings to different viewers. In my next segment, I will argue for the use of artistic practices in anthropological photography as a conclusion to my overall argument regarding the use of photography in the study of visual cultural practices. I will also explore how innovations in visual anthropology can benefit anthropology in general.

## SEGMENT 5

When using photography in anthropology, we must realize that it is always already a cultural practice embedded in a long history of surveillance, archiving, colonialism, advertising, and art. I believe this is the reason why many anthropologists either refuse to use photography or try to construct objective methodologies by denying photography's inherent qualities. Because art as a discipline has come to recognize that photography is more about the photograph than the subject, I argue for an artistic approach in the use of photography in anthropology.

The use of photography in anthropology does not require the suppression of aesthetics or abstraction. Although artistic practices such as style, composition, and formalism can fetishize a photograph's subject, they can also facilitate deeper and alternative interpretations of that subject and of the photograph itself. Artistic practices present the photograph as an object for the viewer to interpret as such. The use of stylized composition and highlighting of formal elements exposes the materiality of the photograph.

Body piercing is a highly abstracted and aesthetic form of the visual communication of meaning. As photography is about the materiality of the photographic object, body piercing is about the corporeality of the human body. Body piercing employs the same artistic practices used in photography. These characteristics make body piercing suitable to representation through photography.

Much anthropological writing operates metaphorically, prompting the reader to make connections between the dichotomy of familiar and strange. Photography can operate in the same way and express what words cannot, especially when studying visual cultural practices; visual subtleties, indescribable in words, can be represented in a photograph. Like the lyrical qualities of text in ethnography, the aesthetic qualities of photography in anthropology can be employed to create extended metaphors.

As David MacDougall suggests, new ways of doing visual anthropology could lead to new ways of doing anthropology in general. I believe that by embracing the tensions of photography, as anthropologists do the tensions of ethnography, we will produce better anthropological studies, ones which take the audience on the journey of the researcher and do not pretend to be all-knowing, handing down discovery in the form of a scientific thesis. Photographs that express the experience of the anthropologist could lead to understandings about how we approach our subjects, as well as other understandings regarding general anthropological method and theory.



**AMELIA GUIMARIN**

University of California Irvine

BLOG:<http://criticallycultural.blogspot.com>

EMAIL:[aguimarin@gmail.com](mailto:aguimarin@gmail.com)